



BY MARGARET THOMAS—
THE WASHINGTON POST

Antiwar protesters demonstrate in Washington in 1971, above; and President Johnson with Robert McNamara on July 27, 1965, the day he decided to engage in a major ground war in Southeast Asia.



FROM "IN RETROSPECT: THE TRAGEDY AND LESSONS OF VIETNAM"



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U.S. soldiers carry one of their dead to a helicopter, a sight that became increasingly familiar as the war dragged on.

THE NO-WIN VIETNAM MEMOIR

Some Say Robert McNamara's Confession Came Decades Too Late. For Others, It Came Too Soon.

By Marc Fisher
Washington Post Staff Writer

Robert Strange McNamara is everywhere these days, nodding grimly as TV interviewers recite the catalogue of his wrongs. After three decades of refusing all comment on the war, McNamara is eager to act the penitent. But reactions to the former secretary of defense's *mea culpa* book, "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam," with few exceptions, have been brutal.

Night after night he is on the tube, taking it. Nearly always, a moment arrives when tears invade his face of gray steel. But his pain is not the story: This 78-year-

old technocrat, weeping now, so many years later, has reawakened the rage and division that lay dormant in so many Americans of the Vietnam generation. A one-week-old book that hardly anyone has had time to read has managed to unite old hawks and doves in criticism of its long-silent author.

McNamara is a purveyor of "prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late," said a seething New York Times editorial. "The consummate hypocrite," said Robert O'Donnell, a military historian in Charlottesville.

"The extent of the emotional reaction to this shows how much Vietnam has been the elephant in the bedroom for the last 20 years," said James Webb, a Vietnam veteran who served as secretary of the Navy dur-

ing the Reagan administration and wrote the Vietnam novel "Fields of Fire." "There has been almost no honest discourse between the hawks and doves of that era."

As he once lectured the nation with charts and pointers, McNamara now offers talk show hosts and reporters a different, though still calmly expressed, view about the deaths of thousands. Last time, he said Vietnam was right and just. This time, he says it was not.

Last time, a man protesting the war lit himself afire outside the Pentagon office of the cool, detached secretary of defense. This time, in familiarly constricted tones, McNamara has tampered with the received version. It's bad enough that Americans died in a losing war, bad enough that the black gash on the Mall will re-

mind generations of tourists of the time when the country lost its way. But now, some veterans say, McNamara has robbed them of the way they justified their sacrifice.

"It's very upsetting," said Jan Craig Scruggs, the Army veteran whose efforts in 1979 led to the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. "All of a sudden the justification that we were stopping communism is gone. To find out that even the domino theory was not real was quite a shock."

"I was more than happy to serve my country, but so many of my friends were killed over there, or are missing limbs and in wheelchairs—and for what? For what?"

See McNAMARA, D2, Col. 3



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Defense Secretary McNamara, backed up by charts and maps, at a Pentagon news conference in 1965.

Reaction to McNamara's Book

McNAMARA, From D1

I always thought it was to stop communism from taking over Asia, and to find out that even that wasn't true is absolutely appalling. Now all we're left with is that we were proud to serve our country in a difficult situation."

Many of those speaking out now are the same people who took to the streets and shouted their opposition nearly 30 years ago. But McNamara is also under attack from the most fervent supporters of the war, and from those who grabbed no headlines in those divided years.

On the Internet, that broad, cours-

ing river of venom and vox tecnie, McNamara has earned his own "threads," sequences of messages from across the land. Sitting at their desks at the office and at home late at night, veterans and others fire off missives recommending a firing squad for the man, comparing him to Jane Fonda, assigning him the role of spiritual grandfather to Bill Clinton, draft dodger.

"The Jane Fonda apology [for her antiwar trip to Hanoi] is a perfect match to McNamara's lame *mea culpa*," one vet wrote.

"McNamara is a truly evil figure in U.S. history," raged another. "He has none of the ambivalences, none of the mitigating qualities, none of the achievements that Nixon or possibly even LBJ have to soften history's

judgment. It is my fervent hope and prayer that one day McNamara's name evokes the same images and ideas as Benedict Arnold's does today."

McNamara, while clearly pained by the reaction to the book, shows no sign of retreating from the fray. According to his friend Elliot Richardson, the former Nixon defense secretary and attorney general who quit rather than fire Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox in the Saturday Night Massacre, McNamara expected this.

Richardson read the book in manuscript form and did not predict the firestorm of criticism. "I sure felt like a boob and an ass that I didn't see it coming," Richardson said. "But McNamara did foresee it. I think he's like a fighter in the ring who's taken

some heavy punches, but I think he's sort of shaking his head and keeps wading in and punching back. He's been through a lot of soul-searching to write this book. He's shaken . . . bloody but unbowed."

Richardson phoned McNamara this week to urge that he make the argument on TV that, by not speaking out during the war, he acted in the national interest. "From McNamara's perspective, one could have concluded that we were wrong, but not wanted to undermine the position of the United States overall as the leaders tried to figure out how to get out of this mess," Richardson said.

Reactions to "In Retrospect" often speak not to its content, but to the idea of Mr. Body Count suddenly showing his emotions so many years after the fact. What seems most offensive to many is not a text that seeks to teach historical lessons and lay out policy guidelines for future administrations, but McNamara's television appearances, his thin lips quivering as gentle questions probe the old warrior's worn emotions.

No one died in Watergate. So Nixon rather painlessly got himself rehabilitated—wrote a few books, gave a few speeches, perfected the statesman act, kept his dark side in check for those final years. But the pain of Vietnam lingers in a different way, precisely because of its facelessness.

Old Nixon video is always good for a laugh. Old footage of body bags and that final helicopter leaving Saigon with its trail of human failure sears us still, exactly because we do not know those faces and never will.

But we know McNamara's face. And there are few others still living whom we associate with that time and that war. His public function, justly or not, is to embody the failure of a decade of American policy. He has dared to violate his assigned role.

Little unites a people as well as anger directed at a single person.

Webb, the ex-Navy secretary, who speaks Vietnamese and has returned to Vietnam often in recent years, believes the United States could and should have won the war. "I keep hearing the word 'vindication' from people who were opposed to the war," he said. "I would say they keep looking for vindication because they did not find it in what happened after the communists took over Vietnam 20 years ago."

McNamara also has provided a rare opportunity for old '60s peacenik warriors to do a little victory jig on the bent back of an old foe. "Those who demonstrated against [Vietnam]

are now, through Mr. McNamara's book, exonerated," said Phil Coleman, senior librarian at the American Foreign Conflicts Electronic Library in Lomita, Calif.

"I feel fully vindicated, but I felt that way long ago," said former senator George McGovern, whose 1972 presidential campaign focused on the war as a failed and immoral adventure. "I'm glad he wrote the book so the historical record is more complete. But sadly, what it reveals is the unbelievable ignorance of our top policymakers about Vietnam. It's been clear to me for 30 years the war was a disaster. Now that's verified by one of the chief architects of the war. I give McNamara credit for admitting he was wrong. We haven't heard that from most of the other architects of the war, including Henry Kissinger."

McGovern, like many across the political spectrum, said Vietnam remains a raw wound, one that may linger forever. "In a sense, this is our second civil war. We're going to be

fighting this war for the rest of our lives."

For some Vietnam veterans, still frustrated that they were not allowed to fight to a final victory, the book bolsters their argument that Ivy League softies such as McNamara prevented U.S. forces from bringing the communists to their knees. "We were never allowed to cut off the head of the enemy," wrote one Internet participant after another.

McNamara is under attack not only for the timing, tone and content of his apology, but also for his motives. At the extreme, he is accused of seeking to get rich off the 58,000 soldiers who died in Vietnam. Times Books has printed 120,000 copies of the book, priced at \$27.50 each.

"I don't buy his excuses," said Diane Carlson Evans, founder and chairwoman of the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project and a captain in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in Vietnam in 1968-69. "If he's truly sorry, let's see him show it. His royalties, of course, could go to Vietnam veterans' causes. He could try going to VA hospitals to visit vets."

The American Legion this week

"In the final analysis, he has avoided talking about human beings, hasn't he?"

—Wayne F. Smith

called on McNamara to donate his earnings from the book to charity. "He shouldn't profit financially from this sad, tragic, late confession," said William M. Detweiler, commander of the 3.1 million-member veterans' group.

But McNamara, a former Ford executive, is already plenty rich. What galls many veterans more than the cash is that McNamara would launch an apparent attempt to launder his image at this late date.

"This comes quite as an afterthought and neither a revelation nor anything of great interest," said retired Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt, chief of naval operations under Nixon. "Knowing that his position in history will be a pretty dismal one, he felt some need to put his own personal participation in some better context than historians otherwise would."

Journalist David Halberstam, whose piercing profile of McNamara in "The Best and the Brightest" solidified the man's image as a cold bureaucrat, has taken to the talk show circuit, following McNamara around to chastise him for being "awfully late to class. The rest of the students have already graduated," as Halberstam said on public television Monday. "He's a neutralized, self-paralyzed,

self-tortured man, and a weak man," he added on ABC.

Even the rare grudging respect McNamara wins for coming clean at this date is served with a heaping helping of grumbling and anger.

"In the final analysis, he has avoided talking about human beings, hasn't he?" said Wayne F. Smith, 44, who served for 18 months as a combat medic with the 9th Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta in 1969-70. "Typical McNamara, isn't it—by the charts, like in '64 and '65 and '66. He's suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder himself—30 years after the fact.

"Oh, well," said Smith, now a fundraiser for a Washington memorial to black soldiers who served in the Revolutionary War. "I salute him for at least attempting to tell the truth. As limited as he is. And he is limited—emotionally stifled, with the blood of so many thousands of people on your hands."

McNamara insists he has not written his book in a pitch for redemption, but as a warning against future mistakes, future wars against nationalists whose emotional power the United States cannot hope to silence with bombs and bullets.

Reaction seems harshest when critics find new reason to doubt McNamara's morality. A man who presumes to offer lessons now must be judged by the silence he kept for so many years, critics say.

Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) and LBJ's attorney general, Ramsey Clark, don't often agree, but both believe McNamara should have acted on his early doubts about the war—especially when he was in a position to influence President Johnson.

"If a Cabinet officer can't serve his conscience, his country and his president, he needs to part with his president," said Gramm, a presidential candidate who favored U.S. policy in Vietnam but accepted academic draft deferments.

But McNamara still defends his actions then, saying he does not believe he had a right as an unelected defense secretary to go public with his reservations about the president's policies.

"To me, the requirements of patriotism are that you lend your personal force to cause your country to do the right thing," said Clark, who publicly

split with the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy and later, like Jane Fonda, made a protest visit to the enemy in Hanoi. "Where it's a matter of high moral importance, directly within the area of your official responsibility, and your position is irreconcilable, you resign, and afterward the duty remains the same—you speak out. If you fail to do so at the time, you do so at the earliest time you can."

There is little charity in the discussion thus far, and some say that is just.

"I think as a Christian, once a person says 'I have made a mistake, I was wrong,' then I find it pretty easy to say 'Okay, I forgive you,'" said Joe Volk, 50, executive secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation and a Vietnam draftee who became a conscientious objector and was sentenced to six months of hard labor for deserting his unit. But he added: "I think McNamara's view now is cheap grace. He is at the end of his life. He has enjoyed the privileges of power and to say all this now, it is too late."

These are not mending wounds. Not on either side.

In Charleston, S.C., Gen. William C. Westmoreland, 81 and retired, is incredulous that, when McNamara called him several weeks ago—just a friendly call—"he didn't even tell me about the book." Two decades ago, Westmoreland wrote his own Vietnam book, "A Soldier Reports," which offered no such reversal of thinking. And the general is stunned to learn that McNamara has harbored such doubts for so many years.

"I was quite shocked to hear of his expression of non-support for our national policy," Westmoreland said, adding that Vietnam is "water over the dam. Nothing can be done about it now. . . . It's an act of history and it should remain that way."

Staff writers Henry Allen, Laura Blumenfeld, Lloyd Grove, Tamara Jones, Richard Leiby, William F. Powers, Jacqueline Trescott and Judith Weinraub contributed to this report.